

I Can't Believe We're

By Lt. Al Cahanding

It was battle group work-ups and another long flight spent identifying orange forces near the southern tip of San Clemente Island. Launch was at 1700 for a day-into-night, 3.5-hour bag. We found the bad guys within the first 20 minutes. Our tasking then became minimal, so we worked on quals to keep the flight interesting. Two hours into the flight, we headed southwest of San Clemente to let our aircrewman practice rigging tankers with NVGs. Suddenly, we got a radio call that would interest any helo crew.

“Red Stinger One Zero Seven, we have word of a real-world emergency. A sailboat with two survivors has run aground at these coordinates...,” the ASTAC calmly informed us.

My copilot quickly punched in the latitude and longitude, and we turned toward the position, 40 nautical miles away. The coordinates were the northernmost tip of San Clemente, but the most direct route would bring us through an operating area that was currently “hot” with the air wing dropping live ordnance.

We contacted FACSAC, let them know we were inbound to the scene, and requested an update. Then, we calculated our bingo fuel and knocked out a SAR checklist. Since NAF San Clemente was closed, FACSAC coordinated fuel with the ODO in case we needed it. We decided to skirt the eastern side of the operating area and San Clemente Island while contacting the San Diego Coast Guard SAR coordinator.

San Diego Coast Guard told us one of their rigid-hull-inflatable boats (RHIBs) and a Navy torpedo retriever were 15 minutes away, so we assumed we would be SAR assist. Right before marking on top of datum, we noticed what looked like a flashlight waving in circles. The survivors were up on the Coast Guard freq, and I asked if they were shining the light. They said that they were. We left 700 feet for 200 feet, and my aircrewman put on the NVGs to keep the survivors and ground in sight.

We told the Coast Guard we could remain on station for 20 minutes—enough time for the two rescue vehicles to get on station and make the rescue, and still leave us with enough fuel to bingo back to our ship. They asked if we could shine our searchlight on the survivors, but our aircraft was configured for NVGs, and all we could use were the forward-hover lights, which do not provide enough focused light. The Coast Guard RHIB approached from the south, but because of the terrain, they could not see the grounded vessel. We vectored them around the Castle Rock jetty where they finally picked up a visual.

The grounded vessel was being tossed around as it took the raging surf and stiff wind head on. The jagged rocks, shallow water, and underlying reef made things difficult for the 18-foot, motorized fishing vessel—a little too difficult, as it turned out. When the RHIB rounded Castle Rock, the crew obviously was surprised by what they saw.

“RS One Zero Seven, the surf, rocks and reef are too treacherous for us to get in there. Do you have a rescue swimmer on board?” they asked.

“That’s a negative, we only have a hoist operator in the back, stand by,” I answered.

A million things went through my mind in a matter of seconds. As a relatively new HAC with a very junior crew, I was thinking about how we might make this rescue. I felt like I was in my HAC board again—options, options, options. What could I do to save these people while minimizing risks? I radioed the survivors and asked if they could get higher on the rocks and to stable ground.

A voice replied, “I probably can get on the rocks, but it’s dark, and I don’t know where to go.”

Just then the Coast Guard chimed in, “Don’t even try it. I’m familiar with the terrain, and it’s too unstable. Stay where you are!”

The two rescue vessels were unable to get to the survivors, the survivors couldn’t climb to

Actually Doing This!

safety, and I didn't have a rescue swimmer to hook the survivors to the hoist. In the meantime, the survivors were getting bounced around a boat that was sure to sink soon.

I asked the survivors, "Are you familiar with a rescue stop?"

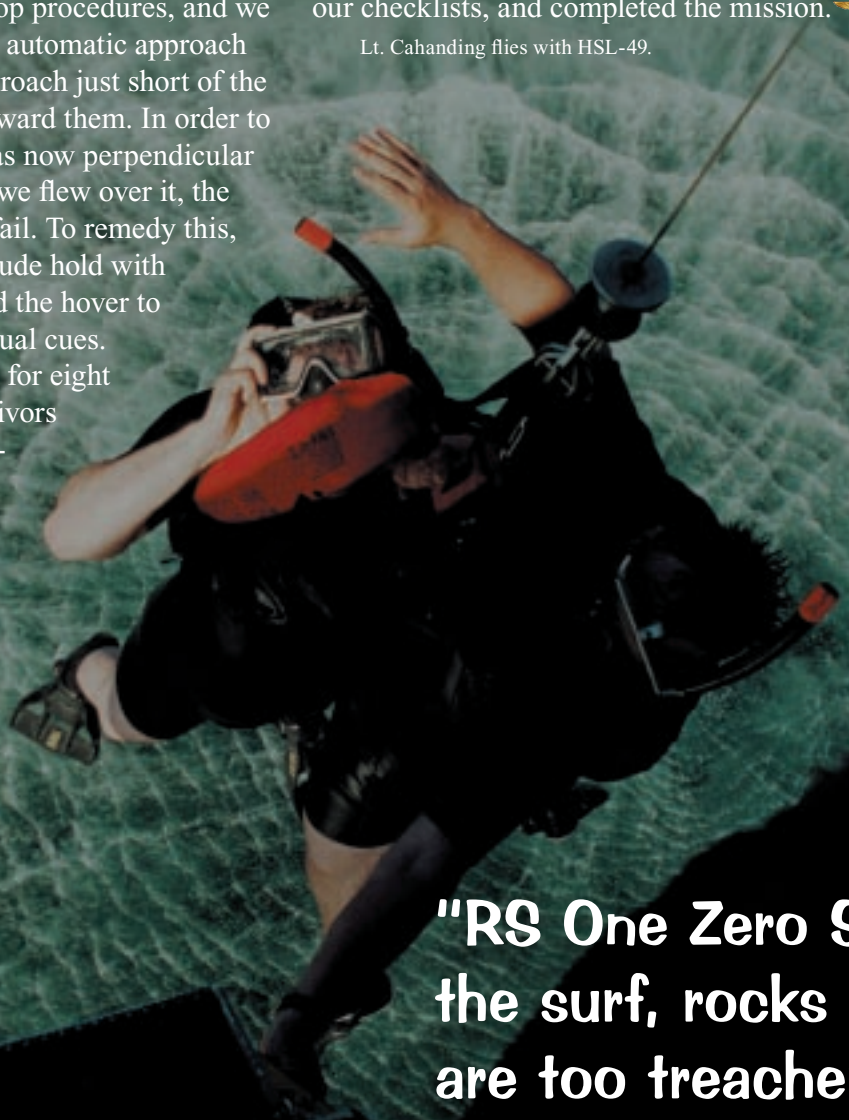
"Yes, we both have experience working as rescue swimmers," was the reply.

With our options running out, we decided to pick them up with the hoist. The aircrewman briefed them on rescue-stop procedures, and we set up in the cockpit for an automatic approach to 80 feet. We flew the approach just short of the survivors and air taxied toward them. In order to get best winds, the helo was now perpendicular to the jetty, and I knew as we flew over it, the radar-altitude hold would fail. To remedy this, we overrode the radar-altitude hold with collective trim and lowered the hover to 50 feet to pick up more visual cues.

We stayed in the hover for eight to 10 minutes as both survivors were hoisted aboard. I contacted NAF San Clemente as we headed back for the lit runway. When we touched down on terra firma, we could see the ambulance approaching. As the survivors were escorted to the ambulance, we gave each other high fives in celebration of our first rescue.

We learned some valuable lessons. Never let down your guard, and success depends on every crew member. Always think ahead and ask yourself, "What if?" There's plenty of time during routine operations to be thinking about things like fuel, equipment and currency. We were momentarily lulled into the thought of being just a SAR assist for the two rescue vessels. Once we realized we would be making the rescue, we used good crew coordination, finished our checklists, and completed the mission. 🦅

Lt. Cahanding flies with HSL-49.



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